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Source: Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Strahan & Cadell, 1776-1788.

Note: It took the author 12 years to write this six-volume set of books.

In the second year of the reign of Valens (366 CE) ... the Roman world was shaken by a violent and destructive earthquake ... The shores of the Mediterranean were left dry by the sudden retreat of the sea ... but the tide soon returned with the weight of an immense [flood] which was severely felt on the coasts of Sicily, ... Greece, and of Egypt Fifty thousand persons had lost their lives in the flood [in the city of Alexandria alone] [T]his calamity ... astonished and terrified the subjects of Rome ... and their fearful vanity was disposed to [see a connection between] the symptoms of a declining empire and a sinking world....

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Source: Peter Stearns, Michael Adas, Stuart Schwartz, Marc Jason Gilbert, *World Civilizations: The Global Experience*, Pearson Education, 2000.

More important in initiating the process of decline was a series of plagues that swept over the empire... which brought diseases [from] southern Asia to new areas like the Mediterranean, where no resistance had been established even to contagions such as the measles. The resulting diseases decimated the population. The population of Rome decreased from a million people to 250,000. Economic life worsened in consequence. Recruitment of troops became more difficult, so the empire was increasingly reduced to hiring Germanic soldiers to guard its frontiers. The need to pay troops added to the demands on the state's budget, just as declining production cut into tax revenues.

Document Analysis

1. In the Gibbon passage, what natural disaster struck the Roman Empire in 366 CE?
2. In the Stearns passage, what deadly illness arrived from southern Asia?
3. Describe one specific way that the two disasters detailed above contributed to the decline of the Roman Empire.
4. Consider the various causes of decline presented by the six documents in this Mini-Q: political assassinations, military problems like armor and conscription, legal injustice, foreign invasions, and natural disasters. Which of these do you regard as the most important three causes? Explain.